

THEY MELTED DOWN OUR TANKS, WE ARE CREATING THE STRONGEST POWER IN THE REGION

MILITARIST NARRATIVES SERVING THE
PURPOSE OF STATE CAPTURING

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Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy

May 2022

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Publisher:

Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku
Đure Jakšića 6/5 Beograd
www.bezbednost.org

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Design:

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This publication was produced with the financial support of National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Responsibility for the content of this publication belongs solely to Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.

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Introduction

Public opinion polls conducted annually by Belgrade Centre for Security Policy indicate that only the Serbian Orthodox Church can be on a par with Serbian Army when it comes to trust in institutions. According to the latest survey, almost three-quarters of citizens greatly believe in the Army.¹ Moreover, the support for the latter has been growing in the past few years, although it is always traditionally high.

The incumbent regime aptly uses the popularity the Army enjoys among the citizens in order to build its own support on those shoulders. Persistent promotion of armament via media has almost doubled the number of people who believe the Army is well-equipped, amounting to around 40 percent.² Massive military exercises regularly broadcast live on the national frequency TV outlets serve to increase the rating of the incumbent regime thanks to the purchased military equipment and armament. A similar impact is made by the growingly vocal announcements of the re-introduction of compulsory army service.³

Defence system capturing is done in various ways. The authorities are using the procurement of armament from different parties to achieve foreign policy goals in order to reduce the external pressure on the authoritarian regime. Insisting on military neutrality and foreign policy balancing, Serbia is trying to keep access to both the Eastern and Western armament markets.⁴ Also, through non-transparent contracts, individuals and companies close to the government opulently profit at the expense of the military industry, as well as through exporting weapons oftentimes conducted in contravention of both domestic and international law and norms.⁵

However, the focus of this analysis shall be on the militarist narratives constructed by the authorities to legitimise in public the capturing of the state and its defence system. In this publication, we shall present three major militarist narratives used by the authorities to capture the state: the narrative of the personal power of the “commander-in-chief”, the narrative of non-transparent armament in order to defend the country from the external enemy and the narrative of discrediting criticism and political opponents on topics of defence.

The narrative of efficient personal power in the defence system has got a dual function. On the one hand, building the cult of a leader as the only guarantor of the state’s success, thus the Army’s success, justifies the non-constitutional concentration of power in the hands of the President. On the other hand, it normalises the military hierarchy as the most efficient model for civilian authorities’ structure, too, whereby the institutional and other mechanisms of government control are discredited. The narrative about the external enemy and the necessity of armament serves to justify the reduced transparency and scandals related to the defence system. The narrative about the inept and non-patriotic former government is used for settling the political accounts with political opponents, as well as for suppression of any criticism against the regime regarding the topics of defence.

Personal power of the “commander-in-chief”

Due to the high confidence of the public, the Army is intensely used for building the cult of personal power. President Vučić is depicted as the sole guarantor of security for the state and citizens in hostile environment: “I am not going to boast like others. The Albanians and Croats are some powers, but what they planned is not going to happen. All those who think there will be new operations such as ‘Storm’, pogroms, the expulsion of the Serb population – my message is that it is not going to happen. And when I say it, it means a guarantee.”⁶ Vučić securitises the stability of personal power by presenting it as direct and only defence from the security challenges the country is facing. In order to successfully complete securitisation, he often draws historical parallels emphasising the threats from the region: “There will be no new ‘Storms’, ‘Flashes’ and pogroms, regardless of all the pressure. Try to bring me down as you wish and however you wish, but Serbia is not going to allow that to anyone.”⁷

In the capacity of the most responsible one for the state’s security, Vučić is promoted as the supreme instance for deciding on weapons procurement, which is actually beyond his constitutional powers. This normalises the dismantling of the constitutional architecture under the pretext of political legitimacy: “I am a responsible and serious man; I study the papers a hundred times before I decide. I always see to it that, as people would say, go unscathed, I am making sure Serbia is as strong as possible.”⁸ The authority of the state’s protector is also built through the discourse on the volatile situation in the militarised region: “As you can see, I know every armament piece they have purchased, you see how committed to that I am as the commander-in-chief.”⁹ The criticism against authoritarian and non-constitutional decision-making in defence is discarded for the responsibility the role of the commander-in-chief entails: “And you’re going to ask me tomorrow, in a different distribution of power in the world, ‘what have you done to protect your country?’”¹⁰ It is important to emphasise the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia does not recognise the title of commander-in-chief, but Article 112 clearly defines that the “President of the Republic, in keeping with the law, commands the Army and appoints, dismisses and promotes the Army of Serbia’s officers.”¹¹

The narrative of personal power as the guarantor of security is often promoted by the President himself in his statements. However, in order to additionally consolidate the narrative and to prove the incontestability of his authority, the identical, or even stronger rhetoric is employed by other representatives of the government. The most conspicuous in promoting Vučić as the only relevant actor in the defence sphere too is the incumbent Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Vulin. While performing the function of Defence Minister between 2017 and 2020, Vulin was systematically building the narrative of a “commander-in-chief” who calls the shots in defending the country: “I know how strong the pressure on Vučić is right now and I know how difficult the next hours are going to be, but I also know that the Serbian Army’s commander-in-chief and Serbian President is not going to give in and surrender. I have seen Aleksandar Vučić stand up against the world’s most powerful people and I know he would sooner give his own life than Serbia away.”¹²

In accordance with the rhetoric established by Vučić, Vulin conditions the attainment of the country's strategic goals with the concentration of power in the President's hands: "Serbia will be military-neutral and take its decisions on its own, as long as Aleksandar Vučić is the commander-in-chief of the Serbian Army and Serbia's President."¹³ From this argument, the role of the Minister of Defence is degraded to that of a mere executor of the orders of the President as "commander-in-chief", whereby the civil service is ordained within the military hierarchy system: "The Serbian Army has demonstrated its capacity to improve its abilities and power. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, our Army's commander-in-chief, constantly takes care of that and requests from us to protect our country and our people."¹⁴

Personal power promotion continues through pro-government tabloids which, employing inflammatory rhetoric, strengthen the cult of President Vučić's personality as that of a leader who has resurrected the regional dominance of the Serbian armed forces by himself. This is testified by daily headlines such as: "VUČIĆ IS THE USTASHA'S THORN IN THE SIDE BECAUSE HE RAISED THE COUNTRY AND THE ARMY! Launching a total campaign against Serbia and its president"¹⁵, "CROATS WITH HEAVY HEARTS, YET ADMIT: Vučić makes Serbia the region's most potent military power with expensive modernisation!"¹⁶, or "CROATS ADMIRE VUČIĆ! Serbia has overtaken us IN THE MILITARY FIELD!"¹⁷ Pro-regime media additionally used the procurement of weapons from Moscow to strengthen the personal support for Aleksandar Vučić, relying on the pro-Russian sentiment of the majority Serbian public: "VUČIĆ ANNOUNCES 7 NEW HELICOPTERS: 3 transport and 4 combat aircraft arriving to Serbia's Army from Russia",¹⁸ "Vučić thundering on Serbia's Army, the giants from Russia are coming!"¹⁹

This is followed by the statements of former military officers creating the narrative of Vučić as the saviour of Serbia's Army, having the sole merit for Serbian armed forces evading the certain abyss. Speaking about the situation in the Army back in 2012, on the eve of the regime alteration, former Chief of the General Staff Ljubiša Diković emphasised that "the state was then facing bankruptcy, and the Army was on the verge of being sent home empty-handed. The numbers - around 30,000, and no money for their salaries either. We sold enormous equipment, millions of pieces of ammunition of all calibres, anti-armour cannons, hundreds of thousands of rifles, howitzers, thousands of portable air defence systems. We melted down our tanks in the steel plant, and in the state fund, where those funds were supposed to be collected for such military reform, there was no money. At the first meetings with the new minister, we came up with a solution to retrieve used resources to the Army until the new ones are procured. That is how we stopped further collapse. I might be criticised for these words, but nothing of this would have happened unless Aleksandar Vučić had been the Defence Minister first, then the Prime Minister, and now the President."²⁰

Non-transparent armament protecting us from the enemies

In recent years, Serbian Army's accelerated armament has been conspicuous, marked by non-transparent procurement contracts and a gaping difference between the planned and executed budget allocations for this area.²¹ In order to justify this potentially corruptive practice, political leaders keep building the narrative on threats to Serbia from the regional countries: "If they ask why we need all that, let them ask why others in the neighbourhood need it if they are all surrounded by NATO member states, only one not being such, and that is Serbia. Serbia is silent when others receive combat helicopters, combat armoured vehicles, howitzers, so why do they give someone launching ramps and other procure ballistic missiles."²² In an environment described as such, accelerated armament is presented as the only way to protect the security of the state: "Nobody threatens them when they purchase helicopters, bullet-proof vests, howitzers from America and Germany. Who arms Albanians – both America and Turkey, as well as many others; who arms Croatia – America and Germany and others? I say go ahead, guys, do your job, we'll do ours, I am not whining."²³

As in other countries in the region, the neighbours' armament is presented as a direct threat to the state's security. Inflammatory rhetoric enables the incumbent government, President Vučić foremost, to pass themselves off as protectors of the state drawing strategically wise moves and arming the military in order to avert the enemy from any form of attack. Thus, on the occasion of Croatia's procurement of the combat aircrafts Dassault Rafale, Vučić emphasised that Serbia is strengthening the Army so that "nobody can ever humiliate us again like back in the nineties and early two thousand. And these who think they are the strongest, they don't know what is under way to Serbia, and it will arrive much sooner than that which they have bought."²⁴ Often times, in order to reinforce the impact of securitising external threat, historical references are made on the basis of past traumas: "Serbia is not stupid, it is not going to attack anyone, but it will certainly not be a lamb ready to be slaughtered. We are procuring defence weapons only, forget about being like my grandfather and everyone else when the ustasha take them behind the house and kill them with a bullet or hammer in the head."²⁵

From the narrative on hostile environment emanates the discourse on the justifiability of the non-transparent procurement of weapons: "Every Army aspires to improve the quality of its armament, to be as strong, solid and developed as possible. But, by the same token, no Army discusses this via media, so I will not talk about it either. When and if the decision is made to procure certain types of weapons, you will be duly informed."²⁶ To the question of the price of the drones Serbia has purchased from China, President Vučić replied: "We cannot tell you how much they were paid, but it is not much. I was surprised myself, this morning when I heard the final price, to tell you the truth. When we purchase other goods from another country, anything related to the military remains confidential."²⁷ This enables the conclusion of

armament contracts in secrecy, completely circumventing the civilian control envisaged for the defence sector.²⁸ Non-transparency is put forward as the only efficient way for expeditious military development, but such resource management is justified by well-intentioned husbandry of the state: “It is a completely different army now, it is a completely changed blood count of our aviation and air defence, especially now that with our friends from the Russian Federation and China we’ve got another arrangement that we are not discussing in public, we want to surprise our people and our citizens, a little bit our soldiers too.”²⁹

We are criticised by those who melted down our tanks

Delegitimising political opponents and criticising them is also pursued through a clearly formulated narrative. The departure point for this narrative is the already formulated discourse of the dismal condition of the military that the incumbent government inherited from their predecessors. The ineptitude and neglect of the former regime are juxtaposed with the responsibility and performance of the current government, primarily embodied in the “commander-in-chief”: “They were destroying the Army’s self-esteem, they were destroying the system called the Serbian Army. They destroyed over 500 tanks and howitzers, thousands of 2M grails (“strela”), more than 20,000 pieces of shooting weapons, everything they were told to destroy and everything our country should and could further use, while they never bought a single tank, not a single new air-defence system.”³⁰

In order to better delegitimise the criticism against the manner of defence system management, the narrative of ineptitude is joined by the one on anti-patriotic, almost traitorous motifs of the politically opposed actors. Thus, the criticism of a part of the opposition and civil sector against the reintroduction of compulsory military service as an inadequate measure for the problems the armed forces are facing, the authorities respond by challenging both the expertise and the genuine motifs of the critics: “The people in Serbia know that those would-be experts melted down our tanks, drove people away from the Army, systematically destroying and incapacitating it. It is clear that they never wanted a strong Serbian Army and well-equipped soldiers, because Serbian citizens would thus be safe, and obviously that is not a priority to some individuals. The Army is the guarantor of every country’s stability and safety, although many predecessors, the same ones who have come down on the idea of compulsory military service today, failed to see it. Unlike those, Aleksandar Vučić and Nebojša Stefanović are very much aware of it.”³¹ To the criticism of the then Member of Parliament Zoran Živković, that procuring second-hand MIGs from the Russian Federation was a farce, the then Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin replied with accusations demonising the political opponents from the preceding regime, accusing them of consciously undermining the state security with consequences more far-reaching than those of the 1999 bombing: “NATO did not manage to destroy

even close as this. The Army was systematically destroyed, its units decommissioned, most eminent officers driven to retirement or to the Hague. That is the most difficult loss to recover, people and trust. That is what we are retrieving and what we are struggling with."³²

In the accusations against the representatives of the former regime, the often-employed discourse of melting down the tanks particularly stands out, ascribed to different actors at convenience. Most frequently, it has been former President and Defence Minister Boris Tadić, as well as the Defence Minister in subsequent governments, Dragan Šutanovac. Yet, as of the autumn 2021, when former Chief of the General Staff Zdravko Ponoš was announced as presidential counter-candidate to Aleksandar Vučić, the regime shifted gears, accusing him of weapons' destruction: "Therefore, when former Chief of the General Staff, now politician, Zdravko Ponoš, says that the endeavours of President Vučić to arm and equip our country are his crisis PR, I can only infer that he either doesn't understand the world's current affairs or that he is malevolent to Serbia. The army headed by Zdravko Ponoš was not able to be a means of deterrence, because it could barely hold an exercise, let alone the non-existent aircraft, helicopters and tanks. Salaries just above the minimum and desperate situation with investment in all segments of defence certainly did not motivate young people to become part of the Army, but that's why the Serbian Army and Serbia itself were excellent to everyone else, especially those not wishing well. Precisely at the time of Ponoš, Tadić, Đilas, Jeremić and many others, the most difficult moments for Serbia and its sovereignty took place, among other reasons because they halved and disarmed our military and essentially prevented the Army from being the true guarantor of security for all citizens."³³ The narrative promoted by such statements of state officials migrated to tabloids, where it gained additional impetus of vigour: "Former Chief of the General Staff, Zdravko Ponoš, has remained etched in the memory as a man during whose rule the Serbian Army saw its worst days, but also as a military deserter who didn't want to wage the war against his in-laws - the Croats! During the two years of his rule, from 2006 to 2008, the Army was left without 480 tanks, 40 aircraft, 50 helicopters and 10,000 soldiers!"³⁴

Other than discreditation of political opponents and their criticism against the way of managing the armed forces, the narrative on internal enemies endeavouring to undermine the army and the state is used also to drop or alleviate the numerous scandals of the government in this sector. The most salient scandal in the defence sector is related to the armament factory of Krušik in Valjevo. Based on the testimonials of whistleblower Aleksandar Obradović, it was revealed in October 2019 that a company connected to the father of the then Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović generated significant profit to the detriment of Krušik, as an intermediary in weapons exports, part of which was unlawfully diverted to Yemen.³⁵ In order to control the damage caused by this scandal, the regime representatives came up with statements accusing the opposition and internal enemies of intending to undermine the military industry, and in particular the Army and the state, by fabricating false accusations. Visiting the factory, President Vučić pointed out that "individuals from the opposition have inflicted

irreparable damage to Krušik and Serbia's military industry, leaving the workers in a difficult situation and showing that they had no plan or programme whatsoever to offer to citizens, just mutual infights and struggle to come in power."³⁶

The then Defence Minister Vulin took a step further stating that "it is not a scandal, but an operation aimed at jeopardising Serbian weapon exports by publishing the names of the buyers. Due to that, many weapon export agreements were meanwhile cancelled, because weapon merchants dislike the idea of their identity disclosure. The "Krušik" hybrid operation is targeting the state regime – more specifically, the Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović, while the ultimate goal is Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić."³⁷ The goal of such rhetoric is to divert the public attention from the top brass officials' corruption by securitising Krušik as a hybrid operation, i.e. to delegitimise the mechanisms of both institutional and civil control of power.

State control of the Army plays an important role in the process of state capture. The Army is the most powerful instrument of force in any country, so it is essential to keep it under absolute party and personal control. The military industry may be very profitable for members of the regime or people close to them if the established control is used as an environment for large-scale system corruption. Finally, the Army enjoys huge popularity in Serbia, so it is most efficient to use it for building the narratives aiming at legitimising the state capture. Through militarist narratives, personal power is consolidated and normalised, validating the abolishment of institutional control, justifying non-transparency and delegitimising any criticism of political opponents. Therefore, the first step towards uncapturing the defence system is to deconstruct narratives that keep the entire capturing system in darkness.

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